The Engineer Command and Staff Course: A New Era of Leader Development

By Major Craig Jolly

The first day of the Engineer Captain's Career Course (ECCC) Class 3-04 marked a transition to a new era of leader development for the US Army Engineer School. This class was the pilot program for the Engineer Command and Staff Course (ECSC), a revised captains' education program that replaces the ECCC. The course redesign incorporates instruction on digital systems and tasks taught in the former Combined Arms and Service Staff School (CAS3). The ECSC is designed to develop adaptive commanders and staff officers for the force who can react to a multitude of situations, based on critical thinking skills and exposure to a range of planning contingencies.

In 2003, the ECCC staff of instructors and training developers conducted an analysis, using the military decision-making process (MDMP), to determine if the sequencing and instruction of the ECCC met the needs of the force. This work group developed two proposed course redesigns: a life cycle model based on the life cycle of taking command, preparing the company and deploying on operations; and a modular design based on end state competencies and critical tasks. When compared to the existing ECCC, both designs validated that the tactical and technical content of the existing course was sound and logical; therefore, improvements in the new design would focus on the delivery of the instruction.

The work group adopted the modular, competency-based design and focused on incorporating critical thinking skills and how to embed these skills into the design. The work group's research also looked into what adaptive leaders require to operate effectively in the contemporary operating environment. It was determined that the future course should produce graduates who have the ability to act in an uncertain environment and make quick, logical decisions based on the information available. This concept was seen as the basis of maneuver warfare that is underpinned by a critical thinking capability.

The ECSC design is based very closely on the old ECCC. The CAS3 staff requirements have been met by using the current instruction in either student-led discussions and presentations or different instructional methods. The major change seen in the ECSC is in the competencies associated with maneuver warfare (the basis of how to think tactically) and critical thinking (how to think logically, using mind mapping, battle analysis, and the MDMP). The ECSC combines these competencies with a range of repetitive tactical exercises in differing environments to enforce adaptability. Essentially, this entails operating in an uncertain and changing environment as the norm.

The ECSC staff has taken the tactical and technical aspects of ECCC and married them with the critical thinking and maneuver warfare concepts of the contemporary operational environment to produce an intense and challenging course. The ability of the students to adapt to unfamiliar situations by thinking through tactical and technical problems is far above the capabilities that were tested and observed previously. The early assessment is that the graduates of the course will be able to adapt more quickly to the environment they find themselves in and will provide the skill set that Engineer Regiment commanders require on today's battlefields.

While ECSC 3-04 has only just completed the tactics portion of the course, the indications are that the changes made from ECCC are on the mark. The spiral development of this program continues from August to December 2004 and will continue to be tested in Classes 4-04 and 1-05. It is clear from the perspective of the ECSC staff that while the underlying tactical tools remain the same, the development of commanders and staff that are capable of— and comfortable with— conducting critical thinking in unfamiliar and time-constrained environments is a tremendous step forward in engineer leader development. ECSC will not be fully validated until these newly trained leaders deploy on operations in the near future. The ECSC is much more than the ECCC plus. It clearly marks a new era in the way we teach our captains to think, plan, and execute assured mobility tasks in support of the force.

Major Jolly is the chief of the Engineer Command and Staff Course Division at the US Army Engineer School. He has served in a wide variety of engineer command and training assignments within the Australian Army. Command appointments include both the 35th Field Squadron and 23d Support Squadron, and his instructional appointments include a posting to the School of Military Engineering, where he served as the course manager for both the Regimental Officer Basic and Advanced Courses. He is a graduate of the Royal Military College–Duntroon and the Australian Command and Staff College. He holds a master's in management and defence studies from the University of Canberra.